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JAILS

Hundreds of New City Jail Officers for Rikers Put Detainee Advocates on Guard

BY LAUREN GILL, NEW YORK FOCUS AND REUVEN BLAU | JUL 11, 2021, 7:34PM EDT



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This story has been updated to reflect the current number detainees held in city jails.

In March, Greg Williams testified before the City Council about his experience being incarcerated on Rikers Island. He recalled observing groups of correction officers hanging out with one another for long periods, talking and “basically doing nothing.”

But when it came time for them to transport him to video visits, the officers would often show up late, cutting his time short, he said. “I can tell you from my time there...how much time and money is wasted in that agency,” Williams told the Council’s Committee on Criminal Justice.

Last year, the city’s jails employed five correction officers for every three incarcerated people — a ratio seven times higher than the national average. Some 7,575 correction officers currently oversee approximately 5,600 detainees — about four officers for every three incarcerated people.

Yet the city recently passed a 2022 budget that provided for an additional 400 correction officers.

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Advocates for incarcerated people had pressed the de Blasio administration to decrease the correction department budget — the largest of any jail agency in the country — by 10%. Instead, the budget was increased by \$27 million over the budget passed by the Council last year, coming in at \$1.18 billion, records show.



Criminal justice reform advocates protest in Manhattan against the hiring of new correction officers for city jails, May 12, 2021. | Ben Fractenberg/THE CITY

Correction officials and the union representing correction officers point to shortages of available officers amid illness and attrition, as well as an increase in programs for detainees, as among the reasons to hire more staff.

But jail experts, including a federal monitor overseeing the department and advocates for incarcerated people, say staff shortages are due to mismanagement — and that having too many officers exacerbates violence. They contend the city should conduct an independent analysis of its current staff and how they are deployed.

“There are a lot of officers who are on the payroll at certain jails who aren’t actually working there,” said Martin Horn, who ran the Correction Department during the Bloomberg administration.

Almost all officers prefer duties where they have little or no contact with inmates, Horn said, including transportation, perimeter security and working

the visitation unit. Officers favored by supervisors often snag roles as record-keepers and receptionists for wardens or deputy wardens, he added.

Those jobs could be handled by civilians who earn less than correction officers, jail experts say.

Sick Days and AWOLs Up

Over the past year, the department has struggled to keep jails fully open and maintain basic services for detainees due to lack of available staff. Some correction officers have been forced to work double and even triple shifts.

In May, the lack of available officers got so bad city jail officials put a Rikers facility housing seriously mental ill detainees on lockdown because there were not enough available officers. Some 1,200 correction officers called out sick that day, and another 700 or so were on medically restricted duty for various health reasons.

On Friday, the number of officers out sick was up to 1,367, according to the department.

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Correction officers have unlimited sick leave but must provide medical proof while they are out. Jail officials are looking to boost a unit that checks up on injured and sick officers to make sure they are actually home recuperating.

Last week, recently appointed DOC Commissioner Vincent Schiraldi slammed officers who appear to be skipping work.

“We have 1,400 people on any day calling in sick and 5,000 people not coming to work and not calling, AWOLing [absent without official leave],” Schiraldi told NY1. “Those people should be ashamed of themselves, and they need to get back to work and support the heroes that came in every day.”



Department of Correction Commissioner Vincent Schiraldi | Courtesy of the Mayor's Office

Sarita Daftary, co-director of Freedom Agenda, an Urban Justice Center project that advocates for decarceration, argued that the high AWOL rate makes it “harder for [the officers] who do show up for work — and of course, dangerous for the incarcerated people who aren’t getting to their court dates, to visits, to medical, to commissary, aren’t getting mail, and all other kinds of human rights abuses.”

Steve Martin, the federal monitor overseeing the correction department, found in a [report](#) published in May that mismanagement of the DOC’s staff “has a direct impact on the department’s ability to reduce the level of violence” within the facility.

Overstaffing has led officers to respond to incidents in larger groups than necessary, increasing the chance that they use excessive force, said the report. Overall, the review found the department suffers from a “[pervasive level of disorder and chaos](#),” with the use-of-force rate against inmates hitting a five-year high.

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A DOC spokesperson defended the additional hires.

“Running the city’s jail system is a 24/7 operation, requiring multiple shifts and different housing arrangements with various staffing needs,” said the spokesperson, Shayla Mulzac. “We are also currently experiencing staffing issues due to the pandemic, our antiquated facilities... and attrition.”

While the budget allocated \$1.18 billion to the DOC, that figure could climb significantly higher. DOC spent \$100 million over its budget last year, and kept more than 1,000 uniformed officers on staff than it had initially projected.

“Given the department’s active headcount remained higher than what was funded due to aggressive attrition assumptions and staffing issues associated with closing facilities, DOC required additional funding in” the 2020-2021 fiscal year, Mulzac said.

Court Crunch Hurts

During a May [City Council budget hearing](#), lawmakers questioned DOC officials about the need to hire 400 more officers in light of the monitor’s critiques. “I feel validated and vindicated by what the federal monitor is saying because I’ve been saying it for 10 years,” said Councilman Daniel Dromm (D-Queens), chair of the finance committee.

DOC officials justified the hires by pointing to spikes in officers calling out sick during the pandemic. In one day in April, they said, roughly 1,875 officers were out on leave. The city’s antiquated jails also need more staff than modern facilities because their design blocks sight lines, officials said.

Former DOC Chief Hazel Jennings pointed to a third reason: a pandemic-induced slowdown in the courts has meant that people are staying in jail longer

before their trials. Approximately 989 people have spent more than 600 days incarcerated, Jennings said.



Councilmember Keith Powers (D-Manhattan) | John McCarten/New York City Council

Keith Powers, chair of the Council’s Criminal Justice Committee, pointed out that the class of new officers being trained won’t be able to work for at least six months, by which time pandemic-related problems should be resolved. “I don’t have a crystal ball,” replied then-DOC Commissioner Cynthia Brann.

The union representing city jail officers says that adding 400 officers, likely by this fall, is the least the department can do to address what it describes as a staffing crisis that has forced some of its members to sleep in their cars between shifts.

‘Officers are Suffering’

The last class of 408 correction officers started Feb. 11, 2019, according to the department. The department has lost over 1,000 officers to resignations over

roughly that same period, said Benny Boscio Jr., president of the Correction Officers Benevolent Association.

“Our officers are suffering,” he said.

He added that programs created for detainees require additional correction officers who don’t show up in the department’s traditional “table of organization.”

Schiraldi has said he plans to vastly increase the number of such programs for people behind bars.

Boscio also defended the staff to inmate ratio, noting that the department has three shifts a day and that not all the officers are on duty at the same time.



The entrance to Rikers Island on Hazen Street in Queens, Jan. 21, 2019. | Ben Fractenberg/THE CITY

Correction Department officers must work for 20 years before they are eligible to retire and receive full pensions. In June 2001, the department hired 347

correction officers.

The lack of available staff has long plagued the department and has frequently led people behind bars to miss their medical visits. Detainees must be escorted to the medical clinic by officers. But if no officer is available, or interested, detainees miss their visits and must reschedule.

Asked about criticisms that officers are not being effectively deployed, Peter Thorne, DOC spokesperson, acknowledged that detainees are “periodically” not getting commissary and have missed medical appointments.

“We agree [with the federal monitor] that we need an independent staffing analysis to identify any changes necessary to conduct deployments more effectively,” Thorne added.

More than \$1 billion of the DOC’s funding for the next fiscal year is contingent on the department providing semi-annual reports breaking down the number of officers tasked with duties that are usually performed by civilians.

Fear of Backward Turn

In an emailed statement, city Comptroller Scott Stringer, who put the DOC on his agency “watch list,” called the \$1.18 billion DOC budget an “unacceptably high figure” and said that the “rising jail population and rates of violence are not trending in the right direction.”

Councilmember Brad Lander, who will likely succeed Stringer as comptroller next year, agreed.

“NYC is now incarcerating fewer than half as many people awaiting trial as we were 10 years ago, but the DOC budget has grown by 20%, largely spent on headcount. Today’s budget furthers that backwards trend,” he said in an emailed statement the day the Council passed the budget.

Mayor Bill De Blasio has promised to close Rikers by 2028 and to cut the jail population to 3,300. The Lippman Commission, the panel convened to explore

closing Rikers, recommended reducing staff levels to .73 officers for every incarcerated person.

“It sends a message that they’re not serious about closing Rikers Island by the deadline,” said Jullian Calvin-Harris, director of the Greater Justice New York program for the Vera Institute of Justice.

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